

## **Integrating process. Follettian thinking from ontology to administration.**

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Stout, Margaret & Love, Jeannine M., 2015. *Integrating process. Follettian thinking from ontology to administration*, Claremont, CA: Process Century Press. 358 pp. ISBN: 978-1940447063 (paperback).

*Integrative Process* by Margaret Stout and Jeannine M. Love highlights the momentous significance of Mary (Parker) Follett for our field. While Follett (1868-1933) was at the forefront of American pragmatism and process philosophy, over time her work was relegated to the fringes of academic debate. However, a recent resurgence of interest in and application of her work is now elucidating its deep philosophical meaning and demonstrating its great practical relevance for contemporary governance. The purpose of *Integrative Process* by Margaret Stout and Jeannine M. Love is exactly that: “to *recapitulate* and *explain* Follett’s thinking in a manner that comprehensively and coherently integrates the many philosophical assumptions that prefigure her unique recommendations for the practice of integrative process” (4; emphasis in original). So what does Follett’s work have to offer to critical policy studies and where does this book leave us?

The final chapters offer a good way to edge into this question. In chapter 13, for example, Stout and Love argue that a turn to Follettian governance could not be more imperative given the current crises of environmental, economic, and social sustainability. Climate change, the global financial and economic crises, and social fragmentation all urgently demand integrated and fundamental efforts to achieve sustainability. For some time, we have known what is wrong on these fronts as well as with the underlying neoliberal paradigm. But we still lack a framework that ties it all together and provides a clear and consistent philosophical vision that inspires practical transformations. According to Stout and Love, a “successful and sustainable response to the crises that we face requires fundamental changes to the manner in which we shape individual and collective action together” (273). This is what Follett has to offer.

Stout and Love start out the book by emphasizing that the key to understanding and appreciating Follett is her relational process ontology. Follett argues that underlying principles and philosophical assumptions guide our behavior and that replacing these with more fruitful ones is needed for more productive action and change. Outlining her four ontological principles (holism, dynamic becoming, relation, co-creation), chapter 2 explains that Follett conceives of the world in non-static, non-atomistic, and non-dualistic terms as a dynamic interplay of interrelated parts engaged in an ongoing process of self-creating coherence. We are constantly relating to one another and our environment in a process of

“circular response” and can foster or inhibit our innate social bonds through our modes of association. In relational process ontology, then, “reality is in the relating, in the activity-between” (Follett, 1924, 54).

The following chapters expound how this philosophical basis is reflected in and developed through Follett’s psychosocial theory, epistemological concepts, thoughts on religion and belief, conception of ethics, and theories of economics, politics, and administration. An additional chapter delves into her process philosophy and its connections with the work of Alfred North Whitehead. Space limitations prevent me from doing justice to the depth, richness, and interrelations of these chapters. To illustrate, her political and administrative theories redefine key concepts (power, representation, state, decision-making, leadership, citizenship, etc.) into a consistent and comprehensive framework for advancing “the processes through which true democracy can be facilitated” (182) by deeply nested, inclusive, self-governing groups in which decisions are not imposed (“power-over”) but mutually coordinated through participatory modes of association (“power-with”).

Chapter 12 formulates three cross-cutting principles for Follettian governance (integrative process, the situation, the law of the situation) that together inform her “integrative method” for fostering democracy as a way of life. “The situation” refers to the “dynamic fields of mutual influence” (232) in which we are continuously “interweaving” with other people and non-human elements. We can foster “integrative process” by seeking “self-organizing coordinated harmony as opposed to externally imposed order” (231) or partial compromise. This requires we discover and follow the law of the situation through a group process of joint inquiry and experimentation of what is the best thing to do. The method of integration, then, is geared to generating a qualitative change in our thinking and commitment toward a new course of action that we all consider better than what we did and wanted alone.

So where does that leave critical policy studies? The book does not explicitly say. It primarily addresses the field of public administration, as “Follett’s administrative theory is the culmination of her body of thought” (5). It also reviews her influence on, and implications for, the fields of negotiation and conflict resolution, organization and management, political theory, and social work—in the former, Follett has been dubbed a “mother of the field” due to the influence of her integrative method and notion of constructive conflict.

It is not hard, though, to find and develop links to critical policy studies. The integrative method forms a valuable approach for evaluating the (relational) quality of decision making and implementation processes. Combining administrative practice with

democratic theory, it offers a philosophical basis of equality, inclusion, and co-creation and practical methods for dealing with differences, uncertainty, and power. Studies of (collaborative) governance, street level bureaucracy, participatory democracy, and collaborative planning could benefit from the way Follett's "prescriptions for authentic participation in self-governance" (242) clarify how diverse actors can productively work together in the face of diverging beliefs, practices, emotions, resources, and structures. For example, public professionals and citizens can learn to better address joint problems by adapting their communicative pattern to the law of the situation (Bartels, 2015). In addition, Follett provides a transformative framework for creating sustainable systems of environmental governance and political economy.

More fundamentally, Follett extends and challenges some of our field's philosophical foundations. Her relational process ontology resonates with process theorists who proclaim a worldview in which "all is process" (Cook & Wagenaar, 2012, 23) and critical pragmatists who attend "both to processes and outcomes" (Forester, 2013, 6)<sup>1</sup>. Moreover, Follett provides clear prescriptions where "pragmatism ... as a guide to social transformation ... is downright disappointing. Dewey has almost nothing to say about how to organize the creative democracy he professed" (Wagenaar 2011, 296). And while the quality of relationships is often argued to be of vital importance to policy processes (e.g., Healey, 2007; Forester, 2014; Griggs et al., 2014, 19-30), relationality has hardly been conceptualized, at best it is grounded in the ultimately individualistic ontology of radical pluralism and its substantive norm of "agonism." Follett's dynamic and processual perspective provides a more consistent and convincing grounding for understanding and improving our relational condition.

Conversely, critical policy studies can explore how Follett's views can actually be realized in practice and whether they can indeed, as Stout and Love claim, help to achieve much needed transformations. This will involve somehow overcoming the fundamental misunderstanding of her philosophical approach by mainstream academics and practitioners: while empirical evidence or practical experience might convince them of her prescriptions for change, they dismiss these as naïve, utopian, and nonsensical from their static, individualistic, and dualistic worldview. For instance, they might assert that relational practices can get bogged down in process without clear decisions or relational leadership turns into nobody taking charge of anything. However, for them to see that such practices are not actually relational, as there is no integrating of differences, and do something about it, would mean they would first need to accept and start operating from a relational process ontology. Critical policy studies faces a similar dilemma vis-à-vis mainstream rationalistic policy analysis. It

also offers sophisticated methods for using “a ‘provisional language of description’ that surfaces the existing practices and problematisations of governance as a first step towards generating alternative democratic practices and processes” (Griggs et al., 2014, 7). Indeed, this fits with Stout and Love’s recommendation for pairing “critique and resistance with pragmatic affirmation that is not dominating in its prescriptions, but rather tentative and culturally inclusive” (274).

In conclusion, Stout and Love do a commendable job in reorganizing and explaining Follett’s extensive oeuvre in a single book that speaks to contemporary conditions. While they offer many new, interrelated concepts to grapple with at once, this should be interpreted as an invitation to reflect on one’s own assumptions and language. I can certainly recommend this book to anyone looking for an alternative vision for contemporary governance, a fuller understanding of relationality, or a philosophical grounding for authentic practical change. Integrating Follett and critical policy studies by exploring the practices and potentialities of her work looks like an attractive and imperative way forward.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> That is, considering the quality of relationships as much as substantive changes in power inequality, social justice, and public well-being.

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